

Online Double-Communication Lines to Enhance Student Interaction

by **BEATRIZ ERAZO**

Like most teachers in the past two years, my colleagues and I have had to shift to remote instruction due to the COVID pandemic. For some of us, that meant learning to teach in a way that was utterly unfamiliar to us. Although we have adapted our teaching styles to this new reality, we miss using some strategies and techniques that worked well in our face-to-face classes. This feeling is most noticeable with activities that help our students develop fluency and accuracy while actively participating in speaking interactions.

One of these strategies involves having students form two lines facing each other. Students might ask a question to the person in front of them or have a short conversation. Then one of the lines moves to the right, and students repeat the interaction with a different person. The same line moves again, and learners practice with another new partner.

This strategy, called “communication lines” (Vorholt 2019), has several advantages. Vorholt states that it is student-centered and flexible, and it can be used with small or large classes. Students develop fluency because they practice the same task with different partners, improving their accuracy and confidence. While practicing the same structure repeatedly, students can focus on one form and master it. Vorholt also emphasizes that

students remain engaged in the interaction since it is participative, and the movement helps keep them motivated.

Meanwhile, Bruhn (2020) refers to this technique as “double lines.” According to Bruhn, it can be used with different levels of students. Moreover, the language focus can vary from vocabulary and grammar to fluency practice, from controlled practice to freer exchanges. For this article, I will combine the two names and call the technique “double-communication lines.”

It may not seem easy to involve students in such activities while teaching remotely; however, you can do it by using breakout rooms in Zoom or a similar app. This adaptation requires appropriate planning; furthermore, you must provide clear instructions and guide your students step-by-step.

Before trying it out, make sure you have breakout rooms enabled in your account. If not, you can access settings to enable them. It is possible to organize the breakout rooms in advance; however, for this activity, you should create the breakout rooms after the session has begun. Also, consider that while it is possible to use this strategy with a large class, using it effectively may take time. Thus, it is best to test this strategy with a small

number of students first. Later, you can try it with more students while their confidence and skills grow, and while your confidence with the strategy grows, too.

Following is an outline of the adapted version of this strategy to be used in an online environment:

- Identify an activity that can be performed using double-communication lines with breakout rooms. Some of these activities could be, for instance, a short dialogue (with five or six entries) focused on a language function or grammar point; questions and answers (perhaps a short questionnaire) to teach vocabulary; a quick survey (to generate a future discussion or debate); or a brief role play (simulating a job interview, offering help to a tourist, giving advice, etc.). It all depends on the level of the students, the learning objectives, and the content you need to cover.
- Keep in mind that exchanges that are too short may not work well in the online environment: for example, simple greeting exchanges, asking a few Yes/No questions when students are not asked to elaborate on their answers, and the like. One reason is that moving students from one breakout room to another takes more time than having students shift to a new partner in the classroom. So you may want to plan activities that require two and a half minutes or more for students to complete the task. Less time than this might not be efficient.
- Teach the content that students will practice, model exchanges, and make sure that the learners understand what is expected from them.
- Open as many breakout rooms as necessary to create pairs. Inform students that they will begin in one room with a partner and then move from one room to another after a couple of minutes; thus, they should get ready for that to happen. You might also explain that one student might stay alone in a breakout room for a moment while other



students are moved to new rooms; instruct them to wait patiently. In each room, pairs will work on the speaking task for at least two to three minutes. Encourage students to actively participate and let them know that you will visit the breakout rooms to monitor their progress.

- Begin the activity and allow students to speak, focusing on the target language elements. After sufficient time has passed, broadcast a message to all breakout rooms informing the students that they will be sent to work with a new classmate. To do so, open the breakout rooms window, click on “Broadcast a message to all” (or a similar prompt, depending on the platform you are using), type the message, and submit it. Students will get the message on a small blue pop-up window. Wait for at least 30 seconds before moving the students, in order to give them time to finish up the task. (You might want to practice broadcasting a message to a small group beforehand so that the process works smoothly with the entire class.)
- To avoid confusion, pay close attention to which individuals will be moved. Open the breakout rooms window and set the mouse to the left of the name of the student you are planning to move. The words “Move to” will appear, and a new window with all the other possible rooms will pop up, too. Choose a room, and after a few seconds the student will automatically “disappear” from one room and “appear” in the chosen one. Immediately after you send a student from (for example) room one to room two, you should move another student from room

two to room three. Keep going until each student has a new practice partner.

- When the allotted time has again passed, broadcast another message advising students to wrap up and get ready to work with a new classmate. It might be best to move, for instance, the first student of each pair all the time, in order to make sure that the same pairings will not be repeated. Another possibility is to choose students based on the first letter of their names. Just make sure you have a method that gives you controlled movement of students. You may repeat the movement procedure as many times as necessary—depending on the time available, the amount of practice students need, the kinds of information they might be gathering, etc.—before bringing students back to the main room.
- To finish, volunteers can perform the exchange for the class, present a summary, or do whatever is appropriate for the work that they have completed. If the class is large, you can separate students into smaller groups to summarize, share, and reflect.

An example of an activity using double-communication lines that I designed for my students is a role play between travel agents and potential clients. First, the whole class learns and reviews vocabulary (e.g., *brochure, book, flight, hotel, reservation*) and the use of appropriate phrases and grammar structures (such as structures related to asking for and giving information). Second, all the students meet in groups of four in breakout rooms to prepare for their role as travel agents. Working collaboratively, they take notes of what they might say, types of services travel agencies could offer to different types of clients, and the information they would need to provide to their potential clients. Third, the entire class returns to the main session and is divided into two groups, one to perform as travel agents and the other to perform as clients.

Give students clear instructions about how much time they will have and what they have to do: clients will get information from

different travel agents and choose the agent they will plan their vacation with, while travel agents will present information and convince the clients to let them arrange their vacations. Then send the travel agents to breakout rooms to wait for their potential clients. In the meantime, assign the clients different roles: for example, a retired doctor looking for an exotic vacation, parents of four children looking for a fun family adventure, a couple who wants to have a honeymoon, and other possibilities. (Your students might be able to suggest some other roles.) After that, send the clients to talk to the travel agents to get the information they need for their vacations. During the interviews, the clients take notes of what the travel agents have to offer. Finally, after four or five minutes, you can send the clients to talk to different travel agents—in other breakout rooms—and repeat the procedure once or twice more.

When students return to the main session, ask a few clients, using their notes, to report on which travel agent's services they would like to use, based on their needs and preferences.

Finally, if time allows, have students shift roles: those who were clients will act as travel agents, and vice versa. Assign other different roles to the new clients, and repeat the entire procedure.

Speaking activities you can use with this strategy vary from tightly controlled to entirely free, depending on the level of your students. With beginners, fixed conversations are helpful, because students can focus on pronunciation and fluency. This could mean reading dialogues, for example. Then, after students feel confident enough, the same day or next, you may provide more vocabulary and have students work on variations to the dialogues. Another possibility is to give students one or two lines of a conversation and ask them to improvise the rest.

Each time you use the activity, you might ask your students how they feel and whether they like the activity, so you can adjust the activity accordingly in future interactions. Once, when

a group of real-beginner students practiced a fixed conversation, I felt it might have been boring or not so useful for them. However, the students said they liked it because they felt they were speaking English and that they “knew what to say.” In time, they acquired more vocabulary and learned more-elaborate structures; slowly and naturally, they moved to more-varied and less-controlled activities.

For advanced students, double-communication lines can help students memorize their parts for a mini-play. A less-controlled task could be, for example, asking students to talk about their experiences in their online classes. You might provide four or five central questions, and students in the breakout rooms can ask follow-up questions based on their classmates’ answers. You could also give a set of questions to half of the students and a different set to the other half. In that way, learners will have different questions to ask and respond to. A variation to this idea is to send half of the students to the breakout rooms, knowing only the general topic of the conversation, and provide specific statements or questions to the other half. This half is sent to interview the other group in pairs, and then they are moved to talk with different peers. The students being “interviewed” can elaborate as much as they feel comfortable doing. Sample topics and prompts I have used in this way are traditions, environmental issues, suggestions for becoming better students, or simply questions to learn more about their classmates. I have also used a role-play simulation for my students to practice job interviews; after preparation, half of the students act as human-resources specialists representing various employers with specific positions available, and the other half act as applicants interviewing for those positions. Afterward, or in the next class, students switch roles.

For all activities, in advance and as necessary, I explain to the students the vocabulary or grammar structures I expect them to use, and at the end, some of them report on their findings or things they found interesting or surprising.

There are considerations to take into account when using double-communication lines

in your virtual class. Moving students from one breakout room to another takes some time, and it can be interrupted if anyone has connection difficulties. Also, if instructions are unclear or students are unsure of what they have to do, they may not actively participate. In this case, appropriate prior preparation is mandatory, as well as having a relevant follow-up (or alternative) activity.

Another consideration is to make sure students complete the task satisfactorily. Therefore, it is essential to broadcast a message telling them they will be moved after 30 seconds (or a minute); that way, they can wrap up the dialogue or exchange, get ready to move, and not feel interrupted. Finally, plan to visit different breakout rooms to see how students interact and help if necessary. My students valued that kind of support.

We may be back to teaching face-to-face soon and use this technique as we did before the pandemic. Alternatively, we may continue teaching online so we can work with this variation. In the end, this experience has taught me that adaptation is essential to provide students with successful speaking-interaction activities even when teaching remotely.

REFERENCES

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